



U.S. ARMY COMBAT READINESS/SAFETY CENTER

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Distracted driving is deadly

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Motor vehicle accidents involving a distracted driver kill thousands of people each year on America's roadways. Anytime drivers text, use a cell phone or navigation system, change a radio station, eat or drink, or do anything that diverts their attention from the road, the opportunity for an accident to happen increases exponentially.

For some accident victims, they were merely in the wrong place at the wrong time and a distracted driver slammed into their vehicle. No matter the circumstances, organizations across the nation agree that distracted driving has become an epidemic on U.S. highways.

Joining the nationwide effort to raise awareness of the risks associated with this unsafe practice, the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center hosted its first-ever distracted driving event, "So you think you can drive ... distracted?" here June 4.

"We are all guilty of driving distracted and putting ourselves and others at risk when we're on the road," said Brig. Gen. Timothy J. Edens, director of Army Safety and commanding general, U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center. "We hope today's activities will demonstrate just how dangerous distracted driving really is."

Thirty-three Soldiers and Department of the Army Civilians, between the ages of 21 and 45, negotiated a one-mile driving course that simulated urban driving while observer/controllers attempted to "distract" them as they drove.

Throughout course, drivers encountered hazards designed to replicate distractions that drivers face daily. They dealt with objects suddenly jutting across the road, "passengers" attempting to get their attention, blaring music, continually ringing cell phones and a barrage of text messages.

"The training was very realistic and helped point out your weaknesses and strengths," said Spc. Hilary Phillips, U.S. Army Aeromedical Research Laboratory. "I think it (the training) will definitely teach people to be safer drivers."

Once the drivers completed the course, the OCs critiqued their performance. Then the drivers listened to a testimonial from a Crestview, Fla., man familiar with the consequences of distracted driving.

In 2011, Rusty Fine's 18-year-old niece, Megan Warman was texting and driving on her way to school. She veered off the road slightly, overcorrected and her car flipped at least six times. She died 10 days later from her injuries.

Fine was also Megan's legal guardian and he said the impact of her death was devastating.

“Never in a thousand years did we think this would happen to Megan,” Fine said. “But it did and it can happen to any family. It’s important that the word gets out about how dangerous it is to drive distracted.”

The National Safety Council reports that thousands die needlessly each year because people continue to use their cell phones while driving, handheld or hands-free.

Here are some facts from the NSC and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration that are indicative of how rampant and dangerous distracted driving is:

- Drivers who use handheld devices are four times more likely to be involved in crashes serious enough to cause injury.
- Sending or receiving a text takes a driver's eyes from the road for an average of 4.6 seconds; the equivalent, at 55 mph, of driving the length of an entire football field, blind.
- Eleven percent of all drivers under the age of 20 involved in fatal crashes were reported as distracted at the time of the crash. This age group has the largest proportion of drivers who were distracted.
- In 2011, vehicle accidents involving a distracted driver accounted for 387,000 personal injuries.
- About nine percent of all drivers are talking on cell phones at any given daylight moment.
- Text messaging creates a crash risk 23 times worse than driving while not distracted.

With the number of people dying in crashes involving a distracted driver on the rise — 3,331 in 2011 compared to 3,267 in 2010 — safety officials are determined to educate individuals on the dangers of distracted driving.

“The biggest problem is most people don’t realize just how dangerous it is,” said Dr. Joseph MacFadden, USACR/Safety Center Human Factors Directorate, research psychologist. “They don’t know the statistics. Most young people (who) are texting and driving these days are completely unaware, and of course, they feel also that they can defy the odds.”

The event coincided with National Safety Month (June) and safety officials hope it raised awareness of an Army and nation-wide driving safety problem. USACR/Safety Center officials are in the process of producing an informational awareness package within the upcoming weeks using some of the information gathered at the event that will be available to everyone in the Army.

Distracted driving is an emerging trend that needs to stop said Walt Beckman, program manager and deputy director, Driving Directorate, USACR/Safety Center.

“Many times Soldiers think they can multi-task while driving and that’s not the case,” said Beckman. “Drivers need to focus on driving and not worry about the text message or phone call that can wait. Taking your eyes off the road or your mind off the task of safely operating a motor vehicle, even for just a few seconds, can cause a devastating accident and a life-changing event. It’s just not worth it.”